R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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MAKING PUBLIC SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE, A CASE STUDY OF P.S. 201 IN HARLEM.

BY- HENTOFF, NAT

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REPORTED IS THE CONTROVERSY OVER INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL 201 IN HARLEM--THE OBJECTIONS OF THE PARENTS TO THE SITE SELECTION, WHICH THEY FELT WOULD INSURE SEGREGATION, THE ROLE OF THE NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION, AND THE ORGANIZATION OF PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY TO OPPOSE THE OPENING OF THE SCHOOL. THE GRIEVANCES AND DEMANDS OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS, AND THE BOARD'S RESPONSES, ARE DISCUSSED. ALSO DESCRIBED ARE THE ACTIONS OF THE TEACHERS UNION AND THE SUPERVISORY ASSOCIATION. EVENTUALLY A SCHOOL BOYCOTT RESULTED, WHICH LED TO FURTHER EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE SITUATION. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 48, NUMBER 7, MARCH 1967. (NH)

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COVER PHOTO This scene was photographed last summer in a Head Start class at Toledo, Ohio. Our thanks to Richard Allen Huston, director of Head Start for the Toledo Board of Education, for the excellent photograph.—**The Editors**

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ment in public works ever undertaken, or likely to be undertaken, in our city. The creation of a wholly new system of high schools, candidly addressed to excellence, and with the honest admission of the word *glamour* as part of our goal, is a risk not to be taken lightly.

But the alternatives are appalling. All big cities in America are losing their population, especially their favored population of all races. The drift to the suburbs places the schools of the cities in frank competition with their suburban neighbors. The American people, broadly, attach the highest significance to the schooling of their children, in rank ordering of the reasons for selecting homes. The public schools of the cities must be sufficiently better than the neighboring suburban schools to offset the built-in attractions of suburban living. Either the city schools must be restored to the high place they held in educational pacesetting a quarter-century ago, or the cities will more and more become a place for the poor, for minority groups, for the aging well-to-do. People from the suburbs will travel over, under, or through the enlarging squalor to get to and from the things that give the cities their reasons for being. And the squalor, in time, will overrun the city's boundaries, and the suburbs in turn will become sick.

The cities are the places in America where all man's good works have been gathered. His industry, his wisdom, his arts, his physical care, his exchange of treasure—all find their places in the cities. The fullness of living and growing up in the cities must be a part of education's strategy. The reality of understanding and living compatibly with people of different races must be viewed not as a liability of urban education but as a glowing asset.

The way of recovery of people and things is public education in all its parts, for child and adult. This is the message of the education park idea in Pittsburgh. This is the very large adventure upon which the schools and the citizens of Pittsburgh are engaged. If it is never wholly finished, it will succeed provided knowing people work at it, believing in it. It is the marriage of physical renewal to human renewal. We have much to learn on both counts.

Making Public Schools Accountable

A Case Study of P.S. 201 in Harlem

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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By NAT HENTOFF

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CONSIDER yourself a parent of a child in a ghetto school in any large city in America. You know—from television, from the unemployed standing useless in the streets of your ghetto every day—that your child is growing into a society in which the quality of his education will be crucial to what becomes of him.

Consider yourself a parent of a child in Harlem. This year, nearly 85 percent of all sixth-grade children in Harlem are two years or more below the city-wide average in reading achievement. Two-thirds of the Harlem children who go on to high school this year will drop out.

Kenneth Clark, the Negro psychologist who has spent years trying to convince the educational establishment to share his and Harlem's parents' acute urgency concerning this waste of children, now says: "It is not necessary for even the most prejudiced personnel officer to discriminate against Negro youth, because the schools have done the job for them. The massively gross inefficiency of the public schools has so limited the occupational possibilities of the Negro youth that, if not mandatory, a life of menial status or employment is virtually inevitable."

As a parent of a child caught in this quicksand, what would you do? This year, one group of parents in East Harlem, desperate for their children, decided to act. A new intermediate school, I.S. 201 (for grades five to eight) was about to open. From 1958 on, parents and other community groups had protested to the Board of Education that the site for the new school would insure it being a segregated school. No, said the board, steps will be taken to make the new school a model of "quality, integrated" education.

The board lied. In the spring of 1966, the local superintendent had the stunning gall to tell the parents that a way had indeed been found to integrate I.S. 201: It would be 50 percent Negro and 50 percent Puerto Rican. But, the board tried to calm the outraged parents, look at all the money we've put into I.S. 201. It cost a million dollars more than others of the same size. It's air-conditioned.

The parents looked at the school,

MR. HENTOFF is a free-lance journalist in New York City. His recent book, Our Children Are Dying, *has won high praise in both lay and professional reviews. An earlier version of this article appeared in the January, 1967, issue of Motive.*

Photo by Dick Lebowitz

"It is not necessary for even the most prejudiced personnel officer to discriminate against Negro youth, because the schools have done the job for them."

standing on stilts, with no windows facing into the streets. And many of them, as one observer put it, regarded its design "as a symbol of the city's attitude toward this impoverished area, the windowless facade standing for an averted eye."

Parent opposition prevented the school opening in April. During the summer, a plan began to be formulated by groups in the community. Among those who shaped it was Preston Wilcox, a professor of community organization at Columbia's School of Social Work. Wilcox, a Negro, has long been involved in community action groups outside the classroom. The essence of the plan, as Wilcox described it in *The Urban Review* (a publication of the Center for Urban Education) was the establishment of a school-community committee. "It would be composed," he wrote, "of individuals with close ties to, and knowledge of, the community. These individuals would be parents, local leaders and professionals in educational or social science fields who would be drawn from the community or outside it, if necessary."

The committee, which would screen and interview candidates for principal of the school, "would have access to all reports sent by school administrators to the district supervisor and the Board of Education, and it would be empowered to hold open meetings to which parents and teachers would be invited to present their suggestions or complaints. Additionally, it would have the responsibility of providing a continuous review of the curriculum to ensure that it remains relevant to the needs and experience of the students and that it be sufficiently demanding to bring out their best possible performances."

There were other provisions in the plan, but its core was the possibility that this experimental program would provide that "in at least one school in one community the school administrator and teachers would be made accountable to the community, and the community made obliged to them. . . ."

The Board of Education, still pointing to the splendor of the building, ignored the plan until threat of a boycott brought the superintendent of schools and the president of the Board of Education to East Harlem to negotiate with the parents. Surprisingly, the emissaries from the establishment agreed to the formation of a community council which would, among other responsibilities, help select new personnel—including teachers—and make recommendations and evaluations of the curriculum.

The parents also wanted a Negro principal. The basic reason, as pointed out in a letter to the *New York Times* by L. Alexander Harper (director for school and community integration, United Church of Christ) was that "when the school administrator becomes the prime daily adult male authority image for children needing racial self-respect and ambition, the race of that principal may prove an educational factor more important than we prefer to believe."

At one point, the Board of Education seemed about to accept this parent demand too. By a behind-the-scenes application of official pressure, Lisser was made to "voluntarily resign"; his place was to be taken temporarily by a Negro assistant principal, Miss Beryl Banfield. She refused. Significantly, only part of the reason for her refusal was carried by the white press, including the *New York Times*. She said—and was cheered by white editorial writers for saying it—that she wanted to be selected on merit and not on race.

But the Negro weekly, the *New*

York Amsterdam News, carried a more complete and more revealing statement by Miss Banfield: "The offer for me to be acting principal of this school was a fraudulent one. Not having a principal's license, I know I could not command the full stature and respect of that position. If I had accepted it, it would have been a disservice to the community, the school, and myself. If I had taken the position of acting principal in this school, it would have helped shield the fact that the Board of Education had no Negro principal immediately available on the list to offer the job to. Therefore, I would have been an instrument for covering up a serious lack on the part of the Board of Education. So, I chose to decline." (There are only four Negro principals out of 870 in the New York City public school system.)

In any case, the board withdrew its offer to appoint a black head of the school. Counterpressures from an organization of principals had shaken the board; and then it collapsed when the 55 teachers in the school (26 of them Negro) said they would not work unless Lisser was returned. The position of the teachers in I.S. 201 was understandable. They were afraid that community involvement in I.S. 201 could transcend their rights under the tenure provisions of the United Federation of Teachers' contract with the board. And, of course, the UFT supported its teachers. The teachers and most others involved were too panicky to hear what the parents were saying—that they did not intend to violate teachers' tenure rights in the school system as a whole but did want to have a chance to participate in the interviewing of new teachers for *their* school.

A boycott resulted, and there were turbulent days of picketing and police lines. The most empathetic of all the accounts of the boycott in the daily press was that of Earl Caldwell in the *New York Post:*

"The parents have many allies now," he wrote, "and they run the gamut of the Harlem community. It's more than just a group of parents fighting for something they call 'quality education.' It's a community now that feels it must overturn a system that is working against it."

The boycott faded, but parental unrest remained high. Kenneth Clark decided to propose a new plan: attaching I.S. 201 to a university and then removing this partnership from the Board of Education's control by delegating authority to a private operational board. The parent's committee of I.S. 201, as Andrew Kopkind reported in an excellent summary of the situation in the October 22, 1966, *New Republic,* "took Clark's suggestion and grafted on it a measure of 'community control' from the now-deferred Wilcox proposal. It was far from the 'total' control they had demanded, and many of the more militant protesters were peeved at the compromise, but the group decided it was worth a try. Clark was the broker between the committee and the school board. He shuffled between meetings of the one in Harlem, and the other in Brooklyn, and was almost destroyed in the crossfire. In his account, the board was duplicitous, discourteous, and unresponsive. The parents were suspicious and demanding. He finally decided to bow out, after a long session with the school board. When it was over, he later told the parents frankly, 'I went home and cried. I don't believe the board is serious or takes the people of this community seriously,' he said. 'The time has come for people themselves to return to direct dealing with the board.'"

As of this writing, there has been no communication between the parents and the board for months. The mayor of New York, John Lindsay, has tried to move the board at least to prepare itself for such future confrontations by instructing it to appoint a task force of "prominent citizens" to explore the problems of ghetto schools and recommend basic changes. McGeorge Bundy of the Ford Foundation is reportedly willing to head such a task force, but so far no Negro whom people in Harlem would trust has agreed to serve on the task force. There have been too many committees, too many studies.

As for I.S. 201, on January 23, 1967, the *New York Times* reported that "the 'showcase' school . . . has a wary principal facing a still-hostile community. Many of its teachers feel encircled by tension and without support and its pupils are often defiant and undisciplined. . . . While unruliness is a common problem at many schools, it is so persistent at this 'model' school that in many classes the chatter of even two or three students has sent teachers into rages."

The board meanwhile, having promised so much to this school, has forgotten it. A science teacher, waving a 26-page list of supplies he had been trying to get for months, told the *Time's* reporter: "The parents were right. As soon as you open the school, the system forgets about you." Several teachers have resigned and more are planning to do so.

There will almost certainly be renewed pressure from the community to force some degree of meaningful local participation in I.S. 201 before it slides irretrievably into being just another ghetto school. Meanwhile, parents in other ghetto neighborhoods in New York, in Rochester, in other cities, are beginning to organize themselves to find ways in which the school system and particular principals can be made *accountable.*

OBVIOUSLY, it's too soon to tell, but the revolt at I.S. 201 may turn out to have been the start of radical restructuring of school-community relations in many other places besides ghettos. And its impact may go beyond education. As *New Left Notes,* a publication of Students for a Democratic Society, points out: "When the parents talk of control and participating they bring out a demand which is relevant for the entire society concerning every social institution. Their demands form the seed of the general call for the origination of alternative structures to the prevalent power relationships in American society. Community control in primary education is analogous to

student-faculty control in the university and one step from popular democratic control over all the public institutions that . . . affect us."

Youthful overoptimism? Alas, probably it is. But who knows? The ghettos may yet have something to teach us all about making democracy a participatory experience. It may be, as Preston Wilcox hopes, that "a community can organize effectively around the process of educating its children." And once organized, it can move to effect other basic changes in the way its members live and work.

Back at I.S. 201, a reporter for the *New Yorker* interviewed Principal Stanley Lisser soon after the *visible* protests from the community had temporarily subsided. What had he learned from the experience? "I am proud of the children of this community," he said. "The way they rose to this occasion indicates that we have been maligning both the children of the ghettos and their schools." It is a statement of such obtuseness and such smug ignorance that if I were a parent in that community, I would make the removal of Mr. Lisser from the school a primary life goal. Not because he's white, but because he clearly doesn't *belong* there.

He is "proud of the children of this community." But after they go through his school, will *they* be proud of the community? Black consciousness is rising, and one of its goals is the instillation of pride in the Negro young. As an organizer in East Harlem told reporter Andrew Kopkind, "the parents' concern is that whoever gets an education here will want to rebuild their community. Now, the most talented students leave. Only the dropouts stay. The only way I know to give young people the desire to return to Harlem—to stay in Harlem—is to let them be proud of Harlem."

Is this new school, with no windows facing into the streets, going to be able to let them be proud of Harlem? Not as it is now.

Prejudice Not Slackening

▼ White prejudice against the Negro has not slackened substantially in the past three years, according to a poll conducted by the Louis Harris organization and reported in *Newsweek* magazine, August 15, 1966. The report showed that:

About 88 percent of whites would resent it if a teen-age child of theirs dated a Negro.

About 16 percent of whites in general and 42 percent of Southern whites object to sitting next to a Negro in a restaurant; 21 percent and 56 percent objecting to using the same restroom; 16 and 44 percent mind sitting beside a Negro on a bus; 28 and 54 percent object to trying on clothing a Negro has tried on.

About 63 percent of whites think all demonstrations are harmful. (Three years ago it was 53 percent.)

About 79 percent of whites would have strong objections to the marriage of a friend or relative to a Negro (84 percent three years ago).

Although upper-income and suburban whites tended to be far more liberal—57 percent of them supported protest demonstrations compared to 24 percent among "underprivileged" whites—45 percent of the upper-income whites felt that Negroes "smell differently."

Half the whites believe Negroes have looser morals and 43 percent believe "Negroes want to live off the handout."

Summarizing, the magazine found that "tolerance flowers in the suburbs" but shrinks among the poor whites of the city, who feel even more abandoned by government than do Negroes.

The Negroes interviewed rejected by a large margin any black power program that means "going it alone," without white support, or abandoning integration as a goal.

Two of every three Negroes questioned (and three out of four in the South) said things had improved for them since 1963, especially in schooling, jobs, voting registration freedom, and public accommodations. But housing, especially in the Northern big city ghettos, remained a sore point that for the majority had not been alleviated.

Textbook Integration Grows

▼ More than 175 textbooks, readers, and supplementary reading materials have now been published with illustrations showing Negroes and whites as a normal part of the American scene. The dual purpose of encouraging the publication of texts with integrated illustrations is to promote the acceptance of the Negro as an unexceptional part of the scene by white students and to improve the self-concept of Negro pupils.

Tidbits from Coleman Study

▼ The inferiority of Negro education apparently results from inadequate home environment and deficient self-image as well as from inferior schools.

These deductions can be made from the data presented in the report prepared by James S. Coleman of Johns Hopkins University and submitted last year to the President and the Congress in compliance with the terms of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which instructed the Commissioner of Education to conduct a survey on "the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin." The survey included 4,000 schools, 60,000 teachers, and 605,000 children.

The response of pupils shows that minority pupils, except for Orientals, have far less conviction than whites that they can affect their own environments and futures. When they do, however, their achievement is higher than that of whites who lack that conviction.

The average minority pupil scored lower on every level than the average white pupil.

The report found that in the metropolitan Northeast Negroes in the sixth grade are about 1.6 years behind whites. At grade nine they are 2.4 years behind and at grade twelve 3.3 years behind.